



Marcie Ries: "The American People and the United States Government are very committed to supporting the rights of people with disabilities and their full integration into society".

The US Ambassador in Tirana, Mrs. Marcie Ries, addresses to People With Disabilities during the visit at "Miresia" Factory June 2nd 2005

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The US Ambassador in Tirana, Mrs. Marcie Ries, addresses to People With Disabilities during the visit at “Miresia” Factory June 2nd 2005

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Good morning everyone!
Minister Bejtja and Honored guests!

I congratulate the Albanian Disability Rights Foundation for its work in improving the lives of people with disabilities. The American People and the United States Government are very committed to supporting the rights of people with disabilities and the rights of people here and their full integration into society. The money that we give to the ADRF is made possible by something called the Leah War Victims Fund which provides \$14 million worldwide for people with disabilities. And I am very pleased that we have a representative of this Fund with us today, he is Mr. Lloyd Fineberg, who is right here, and I want to thank him for coming and also for supporting this initiative.

So what are we doing with the money? We are producing wheelchairs, offering better rehabilitation services, advocating the rights of the disabled, and increasing public awareness. I want to tell you something, a personal reason why I feel so committed to this organization. About 9 years ago my own father became disabled. And he was unable to walk and used a wheelchair. And by spending time with him in the United States I began to recognize how impor-

tant it is that we all make a special effort to care for people with disabilities and to make places for people, to make it possible for them to have normal lives, to work, to visit friends and to do things that everyone does. And this is something which is a constant effort we have to work on. That's why I am so pleased with the work of the Foundation and with the contribution that the United States can make to that work.

This Foundation has established the first resource center for disabled persons, families, caregivers and researchers, and has provided NGOs with information, training and technical support, including supplying 1,500 people with wheelchairs. And of course, as I know from my own experience, obtaining information is very important. Having a resource that you can go to, to help you out, is really critical.

And the Foundation has also successfully drafted and lobbied for disabilities legislation that has led to the adoption of a National Disabilities Strategy. This is an important step forward and an important accomplishment. The National Disabilities Strategy which was announced in January demonstrates the will of the

Albanian Government to act on behalf of disabled people. But the Strategy also requires action in order to benefit the Albanians who need it the most. Equal access to education and employment opportunities are very important as well as full access to medical and social services.

Of course the business community has a role to play in this. The business community can demonstrate its civic responsibility and commitment to Albanians with disabilities. For example, by donating wheelchairs or other equipment, designing buildings that are accessible or equipping their own buildings with workspaces that meet the special requirements of disabled persons. And I hope that they will do this.

The complete integration of Albanians with disabilities into society will require a significant effort but it's a very good goal, one that can be achieved, and I want to tell you that the United States Government will continue to support this goal.

I am very pleased to be here today. I hope to have the opportunity to talk to a few of you after this.

Thank you very much.



Supportive services for people with disabilities requiring wheelchairs in Albania

Following the initiatives and successful projects undertaken by the Albanian Disability Rights Foundation, a ceremony on the occasion of launching the project „Supportive services for PW- Requiring wheelchairs in Albania” took place in the premises of the “Miresia” workshop on, 2 June 2005. This project is funded by the Leah War Victims Fund, fund of United States Government for disability related issues worldwide. This ADRF project aims at increasing the number of people with disability, who then will be able to use wheelchairs in order to enjoy further opportunities for integration in their communities.

In order to appraise the achievements over the 10-year-activity, the ceremony , which took place at the workshop for the production of mobile units, was attended by the US Ambassador Ms.Marcie Ries, the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs Mr.Engjell Bejtja, the USAID Director in Albania Mr.HarryBirnholtz, the Director of Social Insurance Institute Mr.Ilir Beqja, and representa-



tives of disability related organisations and state structures responsible for social assistance as partners in implementing ADRF projects.

The Executive Director of ADRF Ms.Blerta Cani in her opening speech thanked US-AID for the financial contribution to the implementation of this project. Highlighting both the achievements and the difficulties related to ADRF commitment to guarantee a wide range opportunities for the in-

tegration of people with disability in Albania, Ms.Cani appreciated the increasing contribution of several state and civic actors to the special care for these people.

The US Ambassador in Albania, Ms.Ries, stated the commitment of the American people and the United States Government to provide assistance and to support the rights of the people with disability in the society. Pointing out the work carried out by the ADRF for



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the production of the mobile units, produced by the people with disability in the “Miresia” workshop, the activity of the resource center, the ADRF lobbying to draft the National Strategy on People with Disability, Ms. Ries said that she personally felt being part of this experience. Taking care of her father, who used to be a wheel-chair user years ago, made her realise the importance of accessibility to public premises in general, in order to be able to integrate them in the daily life. Encouraging a stronger support from the state structures and business community for these people, Ms. Reis assured the support of the United States Government for the full integration of the people with disability in the Albanian society.

Other speakers in the ceremony were Mr. Harry Birnholtz, US-AID Director, Mr. Lloyd Fineberg, Leah War Victims Fund Representative, Mr. Bejtja, Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, who expressed their belief in the successful implementation of ADRF project.

Participants in this ceremony had the opportunity to exchange opinions and share feelings with the people with disabilities, who work in the “Miresia” workshop, and the children with disability who have been provided with mobile units produced in this workshop. Ambassador Ries, representatives of USAID and state agencies visited the workshop premises and appreciated the integrating atmosphere and conditions that ADRF has offered to these people thanks to the implementation of its projects.

Implementation of Albanian state subsidy policies for people with disabilities

On 27 June 2005, a contract for the production of 200 wheel-chairs for the invalids of labour enrolled under social security schemes was concluded between ADRF and Social Insurance Institute in the “Miresia” Workshop premises, a ADRF (Albanian Disability Rights Foundation) programme. This contract was duly signed by Mr. Ilir BRQJA, Director General of Social Insurance Institute and Ms. Blerta ÇANI, Executive Director of ADRF. This contract, the second of this kind, is based on the Council of Ministers Decision No.204, dated 07, 04, 2005 on the allocation of a fund of ALL 5.000.000 (five millions) for the production of mobile units for invalids.

The allocation of funds for the production of mobile units at “Miresia” Workshop, the only existing workshop of this kind in country, for the second time from the Albanian Government has directly contributed to the sustainability of a social project, which through its following ob-

No.	Regional Social Insurance Offices	Number of delivered wheel-chair
1.	Berat	32
2.	Diber	35
3.	Durres	39
4.	Tirane	14
5.	Elbasan	15
6.	Fier	33
7.	Gjirokaster	14
8.	Korçe	30
9.	Kukes	1
10.	Lezhe	17
11.	Shkoder	19
12.	Vlore	12

jectives aims at the integration of people with disabilities: provision of direct services, wheel-chairs for people with disabilities in need of them, and offering employment opportunities. People with disabilities, wheel-chair users, work at the “Miresia” Workshop.

The support of Albanian government for such a project has for the first time in Albania enabled the implementation of subsidy policies for people with disabilities, towards whom the

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state has legal obligations.

The steady partnership between the state structures and ADRF on the provision of subsidizing services for people with disabilities is a guarantee for the fulfilment of the needs of an increasing number of people with disabilities in need of mobile units encouraging the development of such programmes, which promote the rights of people with disabilities in Albania and which have a direct impact on increasing the quality of their life. ADRF has closely co-operated with Regional Social Insurance Offices throughout the country to deliver 200 wheel-chairs in accordance with the timelines stated in the contract and the needs of invalids of labour for them.

Based on this practice and the identification of increasing needs for mobile units of people with disabilities due to various factors, as well as on the assumption of Albanian state limited capacity to subsidize this kind of service at once, the steady support of the Albanian Government becomes indispensable.





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Programme "Advocacy and Legal Assistance on Disability" in 5 more towns in Albania

ADRF (Albanian Disability Rights Foundation), through its programmes, aiming at assisting People with Disability and their family members in other towns but Tirana, has since January 2005 extended the activity of the Programme "Advocacy and Legal Assistance on Disability" in 5 more towns in Albania i.e. Shkodra, Korca, Durres, Elbasan and Vlora.

Co-operation agreements have been established with CSDC offices (Civil Society Development Centres set up by the OSCE) in these towns. These agreements consist on the introduction of Lawyers (contracted by ADRF) at these Centres aiming at providing legal consultancy, expertise in preparing documentation and free of charge advocacy to all those people

whose rights have been denied or violated by the public administration structures due to disability.

In concrete terms:

- The lawyer offers legal consultancy and assistance to all the categories of disability in the area s/he covers including;
- Expertise in preparing the documentation;
- Guidelines and instructions on the procedures or documentation required so that people with disability enjoy their rights;
- Legal representation to



protect the rights of people with disability at public administration structures such as KEMP, social insurance offices, municipalities or communes;

- The lawyer also offers to the clients informative materials, brochures and/or leaflets on disability rights, which are properties of the ADRF Resource Centre.

The lawyer is at your service two days a week to assist you in finding solutions to your problems and complaints.

Why is this convention needed?

- This convention has the potential to become a specific legally binding convention to protect disability rights.
- This convention is expected to improve the profile and status of people with disabilities world-wide enhancement of the rights of people with disabilities and their best protection.
- This convention may develop social policies and create clear references for the future development of disability rights.
- Life experience of people with disabilities until now has proved that the rights of people with disabilities have not been protected and the legal instruments have not been effective to address this situation.

Drafting of a special convention on disability rights, which will be the first and the most important document to acknowledge and protect the disability rights, is currently under discussion at the UN, New York.

For several years NPO-s operating in the area of disability and UN member states have been discussing the possibility of a convention specific to people with disability. Initially the initiatives were rejected on the grounds that the existing human rights instruments provide sufficient protection. However, support for a specific convention has steadily increased due to the influence of the organisations operating in the area of disability.

This idea was further developed since April 2000, when the Commission on Human Rights in its resolution 2000/51 invited the High Commissioner on Human Rights to examine the measures to strengthen the protection and monitoring of the human rights standards concerning disability. In November 2001, the Mexican President



Draft - Comprehensive and Integral Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of People with Disability

made a speech to the UN General Assembly introducing the idea of a convention. He said: "It would be impossible to make this world more just if we allow the exclusion of the most vulnerable groups." While in December 2001, the General Assembly established an Ad Hoc Committee on a Comprehensive and Integral International Convention on Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities. This draft-convention would be based on the work done in the fields of social development, human rights and non-discrimination and taking into account the recommendations of the Commission on Human Rights and the Commission for Social Development." In July-August 2002, the Ad Hoc Committee held its first meeting, which focused on the structure of the proposed convention and processes for its development. This Committee gathers two times a year. The working group consists of representatives of UN member states, non-governmental organizations and national human rights structures. During 2.08.2005 -

12.08.2005 the 6th meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee was held. In August 2004, for the first time the participation of Albania in one of the meetings on the draft-convention was enabled, due to the initiative of ADRF Advocacy Group.

Following a meeting with the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Luan Hajdaraga, ADRF undertook the initiative to encourage the participation of the Albania state in the drafting process of this convention. Draft Comprehensive and Integral International Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the

Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities consists of 25 articles, which are still under discussions by the member states.

The purpose⁷ of this Convention shall be to ensure the full, effective and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by persons with disabilities. The purpose of this Convention shall ensure the full, effective and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by people with disability.

The constitutional right to participate in election processes – an equal right for every citizen

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Along with usual, necessary voting materials, in the voting centres for the General Elections for the Parliament of Albania held on the 3rd of July 2005, voters also noticed that close to the normal voting booths there were also special voting booths of a different size; and on the Voting Centres Commissions' desks there were also some special envelopes of the same size and colour with the ballot papers. **For the first time in the history of election processes in Albania, in the elections of the 3rd of July 2005, the Central Election Commission managed to provide and distribute special voting devices for the blind people and voting booths accessible for wheel-chair users to the voting centres, offering more access for an equal, direct and secret voting for all the citizens.**

In 2002, the Albanian Disability Rights Foundation initiated an organised effort, the first one of this kind after '90, to enable people with disability to be totally involved in the election processes, so that people with disability – blind people, people with mobility problems, hospitalized or not able to move out of their homes - could enjoy their constitutional right to vote in an equal, direct and secret way; a constitutional right which they practically could not exercise.

The campaign to involve people with disability in the election processes, part of which was also the establishment of the

For the first time in elections of July 3d, 2005 CEC offers possibilities for more access to equal, independent and secret voting for PWD

election observation mission for the general elections for the Parliament of Albania, served to this end.

This election observation mission composed of 66 domestic observers, all people with disabilities or their family members, who observed 142 voting centres in three cities/towns – Tirana, Elbasan and Librazhd.

The objective of this election observation mission, composed of people with disabilities, during the observation of the election process was to observe the accessibility provided and the participation of people with disability in the elections of the 3rd of July 2005, monitoring the fulfilment of the right to vote in a direct, free and democratic way just like all the other citizens of the Republic of Albania.

In order to identify the level of turnout of people with disabilities in the election process of the 3rd of July 2005, pre- and post-elections surveys were conducted through interviews, tele-





phone calls and special questionnaires.

As a result of the efforts made by ADRF and the disability-related organisations, members of the Advocacy Group, improvements were made to the Electoral Code to guarantee a direct voting for people with disabilities, especially for the blind people through using special voting devices. However, in the article 103 of the Electoral Code there are still shortcomings, which have an impact on the decrease of the percentage of the turnout of people with disabilities in elections. These shortcomings are related to the lack of the contemporary alternatives for the voters with disabilities and the lack of the mechanism which would enable the identification of voters with disabilities.

What did the election administrative system offer?

For the first time in the history of elections of Albania, the direct and secret voting for the blind people in Albania through the special voting devices was achieved.

Partial access was provided to people with physical disabilities and elderly people. This was ev-

ident in the establishment of the voting centres mainly at the ground floors of the buildings as well as making the voting centres inside accessible; commissioners showed a higher level of information on the disability issues and special voting booths for wheel-chair users were provided by the Central Election Commission.

The identification of voters with disabilities at the voters' lists, which would enable an increase of a higher access and turnout, was not achieved, due to the

insufficient co-ordination between the election structures. There was not a serious commitment from the respective election related structures to enable a higher level of accessibility for the voters with disabilities (though the voting centres were placed on the ground floors, they had stairs at the entrance). Establishment of special voting centres for the hospitalised voters did not happen.

It is very important to emphasize that the process of involving people with disabilities in the election processes has marked progress within a short timeframe. There exists a positive attitude in Albania to respect the right of the people with disabilities to vote. Though there are positive achievements regarding the improvement and enforcement of the legislation, the achievement of a full participation of the people with disabilities in the election processes requires further commitments to reach the standards and enable that every single person with disability votes.



Recent increasing information on the new designing and construction concepts has raised the awareness of the institutions towards people with disability, which is also based on the extraordinary contribution of the Albanian Disability Rights Foundation (ADRF).

A direct reflection of the care for the integration of people with disabilities in the social and political life is the creation of a supportive and accessible infrastructure, particularly avoiding barriers while designing and constructing.

The enactment of the Urban Designing and Architecture Rules on People with Disabilities by the Council of Ministers in October 2004, which are legally-binding for designers, investors and constructors, has raised the awareness and the responsibility of the experts of this field. Another contribution to raising this awareness was also the training courses delivered to the authorities and experts of the urban designing structures and secretaries of Territory Adjustment Councils (TAC) in the principle municipalities and regions of Albania by the Albanian Disability Rights Foundation.

Such training courses have already been delivered in Tirana, Durres, Vlora, Elbasan, Pogradec, Shkodra and Lezha. Some 75 persons, representing designing and implementing structures of architecture projects, urban designing and infrastructure, participated in these training courses. A good will and a positive tendency to implement the approved rules have been noted in general during the training courses.

Through discussions with

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Free-barrier constructions and experts



participants, it came out that a considerable part of them had personally come across the problems and difficulties the people with disabilities have to live with, because many of them used to live or live close to them either as a child, parent, sibling or other kin.

It was emphasised that the experts should feel the duty towards people with disability, without any criticism from whoever, but those constructors and investors who want to make high profits out of their business, disregarding the fact that the comfort is incomplete if it not accessible to all. There would be no criticism at all, if there were free-barrier designs

and constructions, giving the possibility that living, working, studying and entertaining environments were accessible to all.

Judging from this point of view, it would be a service/benefit not only to people with disabilities, but also to the whole society which would be able to use the hidden resources that people with disabilities possess, but which cannot, due to the designing and construction barriers. As such you do a service also to yourself, because everyone can experience a period of disability due to old age, disease, etc.

The high rates of constructions, especially in the main

towns/cities, and the increase of their quality through using expensive constructing materials are still in a contradiction with the inside comfort to be created by the necessary space and supportive elements, which are not only aesthetic but also functional.

From their experience as designers or constructors, the experts came to the conclusion that: to construct based on functional designs/projects, is far cheaper than to do re-construction works to improve the functions, which becomes even more difficult regarding the space of lifts, staircases and in other cases of toilets, doors, etc.

During those training courses it was noted that the Appendix to the Urban Design Regulation will overcome this shortcoming and will increase the attention of the responsible structures towards people with disabilities.

Initiatives to implement the provisions of the Appendix to the Urban Design Regulation on a certain street/road, which presented during those training courses, though coming from some distant towns should be hailed.

It has to be highlighted the immediate commitment of Tirana Municipality, which soon after the training course, took measures not to approve the designs/projects which are not in compliance with the Urban Designing and Architecture Rules for People with Disabilities.

Along with public awareness campaigns, massive enforcement of rules of Urban Designing and Architecture for People with Disabilities should be considered as a legal obligation and the same stand should be taken on the violation of these rules as on any other violation of law.

On the other hand, the decision of the Territory Adjustment Council of one of the municipalities, which considers the implementation of these norms in our country as premature, is irrelevant.

An interesting example was presented to the participants by the Head of the Urban Designing Office in Koplik/Shkodra, who having stayed for a few days in Benign had noticed that all the new five stars hotels had ramps in stead of stairs at the entrance.

An experience shows that when designers, investors and constructors do have a vision and aim at constructing buildings, which would be appropriate in all times, do not have to go through all the

stages that other societies already have, i.e. from discrimination of people with disabilities to their integration, but they apply directly the advanced concepts of the developed world, i.e. the comprehensive concept.

Other training courses are being delivered and will be delivered in other regions and municipalities in country. However, it is the time to emphasise that **along with public awareness campaigns, massive enforcement of rules of Urban Designing and Architecture for People with Disabilities should be considered as a legal obligation and the same stand should be taken on the violation of these rules as on any other violation of law.**

Acknowledging that society heads always towards progress, believing in the constant increase of professional skills and responsibility of the experts, who represent everything new and progressive, the implementation of new concepts in construction, including free-barrier constructions or constructions accessible to all, will soon be part of all the studies and implementations in the area of constructions.





FOR A MORE ACTIVE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY TO IMPLEMENT NATIONAL STRATEGY ON PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

In the framework of a programme supported by Soros, the Foundation of Open Society for Albania, over 2005 ADRF is developing intensive activities aiming at encouraging the implementation of the National Strategy, achieving the goal and respecting fundamental principles which govern this framework of policies adopted by the Albanian Government in January 2005; a goal and principles which are in compliance with the mission and the vision of the Albanian Disability Rights Foundation.

The non-existence of a National Strategy on People with Disability until now brought about lack of monitoring structures. Assessment and monitoring in disability area is almost totally missing. Disability issues have been treated spo-

ADRF (Albanian Disability Rights Foundation), which initiated and encouraged drafting and adoption of the National Strategy on People with Disability, continues to play its initiating role, this time in terms of encouraging its implementation.

radically and as a consequence also sporadically assessed, while ADRF, in its programmes, promotes equality of opportunities and access to all fields, which require multi-sectors intervention and multi-dimension monitoring. Implementation of this strategy requires an active commitment of the central and local government, NGOs, people with disabilities and soci-

ety in general.

The main directions that the Foundation is channelling its activities to contribute to encouragement of the implementation of the Strategy are the familiarisation of the responsible actors with the content of this policy-making document, the action plan and the respective responsibilities in planning, implementation and assessment.

A special attention is given to the involvement of disability related organisations through investing in their capacity-building by introducing the methods and tools for advocacy aiming at developing advocacy campaigns at central and local levels to encourage implementation of the National Strategy on People with Disability and advocating for the rights of people with disabilities and their family members in Albania. To this end, 4 training sessions with the participation of 60 representatives from disability related NGOs in Tirana, Shkodra, Elbasan and Pogradec were delivered.

Informative and awareness workshops on the national strategy organized at various levels: regional level; region/prefecture, municipality or sometimes even boroughs; state structures responsible for disability issues at central or local level; and the involvement of other disability related organisations, aimed at establishing the dialogue, which will remain open for planning, co-ordinating and constantly following-

up the implementation of this national strategy.

Such workshops have been already held in a few regions such as Shkodra, Tirana and Elbasan and work is being done to organise others in other regions in Albania such as Korca, Lezha, Berat, etc.

Some 129 people from the above-mentioned locations, representatives from state structures (including heads of departments and experts of the field), participated in the these workshops.

The agenda of the workshop contains: a presentation of the goal of this project, a brief presentation of the National Strategy and the role of disability related NGOs grouped at ADRF played in drafting this Strategy, the importance of monitoring and establishing various monitoring mechanisms of the Strategy.

On the second half of the agenda, the participants divided into working groups according to the departments that they represented in line with the action areas of the Strategy, and based on the handouts prepared by ADRF experts, analyzed the respective objectives for the fields as stated in the Strategy. They also discussed and made recommendations about the indicators, which could be used for the monitoring mechanism.

In order to establish the dialog and raise public awareness at a larger scale on the National Strategy on People with Disability, and clarify the roles and responsibilities of every actor



involved and particularly of the central and local government, civil society and the whole community to accomplish the objectives and take concrete measures to ensure mainstreaming and a equal treatment in the community for all the people with disabilities and their family members, ADRF has foreseen two TV debates. One of them has already been developed on ETV (Egnatia Television) in Elbasan Region. The special characteristic of this TV edition, as the local government representatives participating in this edition and the journalists/moderator for this debate stated, was that for the first time on the ETV, a local electronic media, such a debate was organised with its total focus on disability issues and discussions about the National Strategy on People with Disability. Elbasan and ETV were selected for a number of reasons: a) a location with the highest percentage of people with disability; b) a location where the regional and municipal structures have positively reacted towards the co-operation offered, and as a consequence it is necessary to invest more in all respects including provision of information to encourage further and

more concretely developments in disability area; c) a location which can be used as a model regarding the achievements in various areas such as integrated education, services, employment, etc. and replicate in other locations. This TV edition was worked out by ETV chief editor, who is one of the journalists who over the last two years participated in ADRF capacity building programme for national and local media on disability issues. This edition was broadcasted in the evening covering a considerable number of TV audience.

ADRF, as an organisation aiming at encouraging and promoting the rights of people with disability and their family members, will continue its activity through constantly following up the way disability issues are treated, organising platforms for lobbying and advocacy, using ADRF expertise in treating cases of disability rights abuse and violation. All these activities will encourage the implementation of the National strategy on People with Disability, as a comprehensive policy framework covering all life aspects such as; economic, political, social and cultural.